

## Chapter 3: Important Factors Related to English Learner Status

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### Chapter Overview

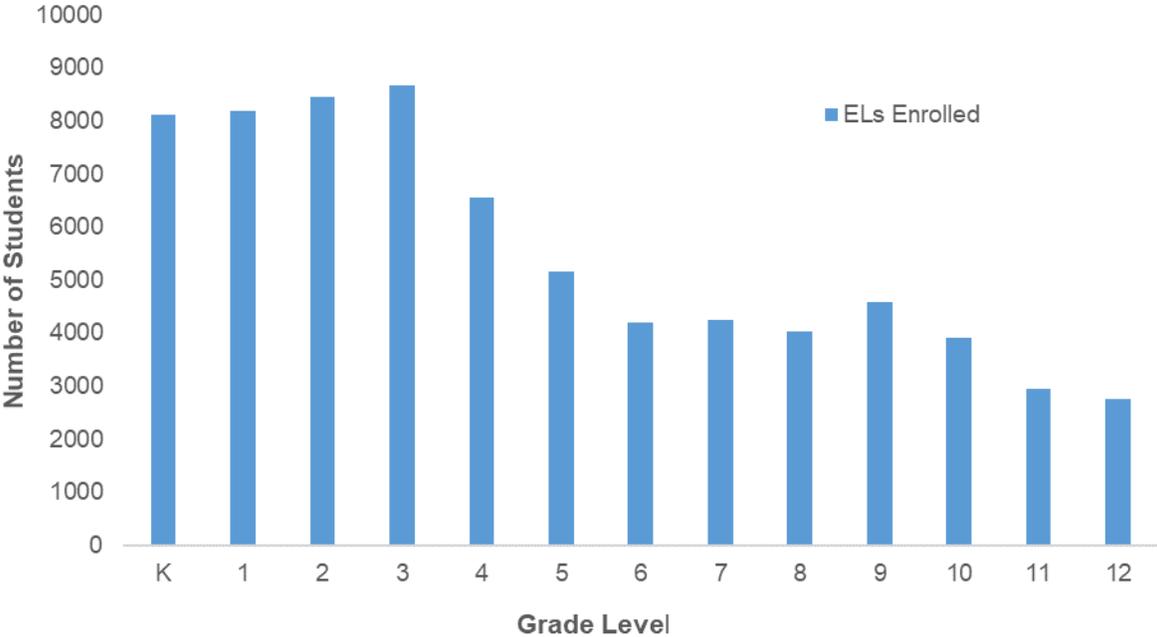
English learners (ELs) are described by their level of proficiency in English. It is easy to think of English proficiency as these students’ most important characteristic, but ELs are affected by other factors as well as language. This chapter first provides a brief description of ELs in Minnesota. It then highlights factors other than English proficiency that may be related to a student’s academic outcomes. These factors include a student’s cultural background, migration status, levels of acculturative stress, and socioeconomic status. Teachers should keep these factors in mind as they determine whether to refer an EL for a special education evaluation, as well as when they decide how to administer assessments and interpret evaluation data.

### Who are ELs in Minnesota?

For a student to be classified as an EL in the state of Minnesota, he or she has to meet two separate requirements. First, a parent or guardian has to declare that the student first learned a language other than English, speaks a language other than English, understands a language other than English, or has consistent interaction in a language other than English. This information is collected on the Minnesota Language Survey.<sup>i</sup> Second, the student must receive a score below the proficient level on an approved English Language Proficiency screening assessment.<sup>ii</sup> Once a student is identified as an EL, he or she is eligible for EL services. Parents are notified at this point and are informed that they have the right to refuse EL services. It is important to note, however, that students who are not formally classified as ELs may still have language or cultural adjustment issues that affect their academic outcomes in U.S. schools. In 2016-17, only a little more than half of Minnesota students who had a first language other than English were identified as ELs.<sup>iii</sup>

The EL population is the fastest growing student population in the state, having increased 300 percent in the past 20 years.<sup>iv</sup> According to *English Learner Education in Minnesota: Fall 2017 Report*, in 2016-17, just over 71,000 students, representing 8.4 percent of all K-12 students in Minnesota public schools, were identified as ELs.<sup>v</sup> Figure 3-1 shows the distribution of Minnesota’s ELs across grades.<sup>vi</sup> Numbers of ELs were highest in the elementary grades, with the largest numbers of ELs enrolled in grades K-3.

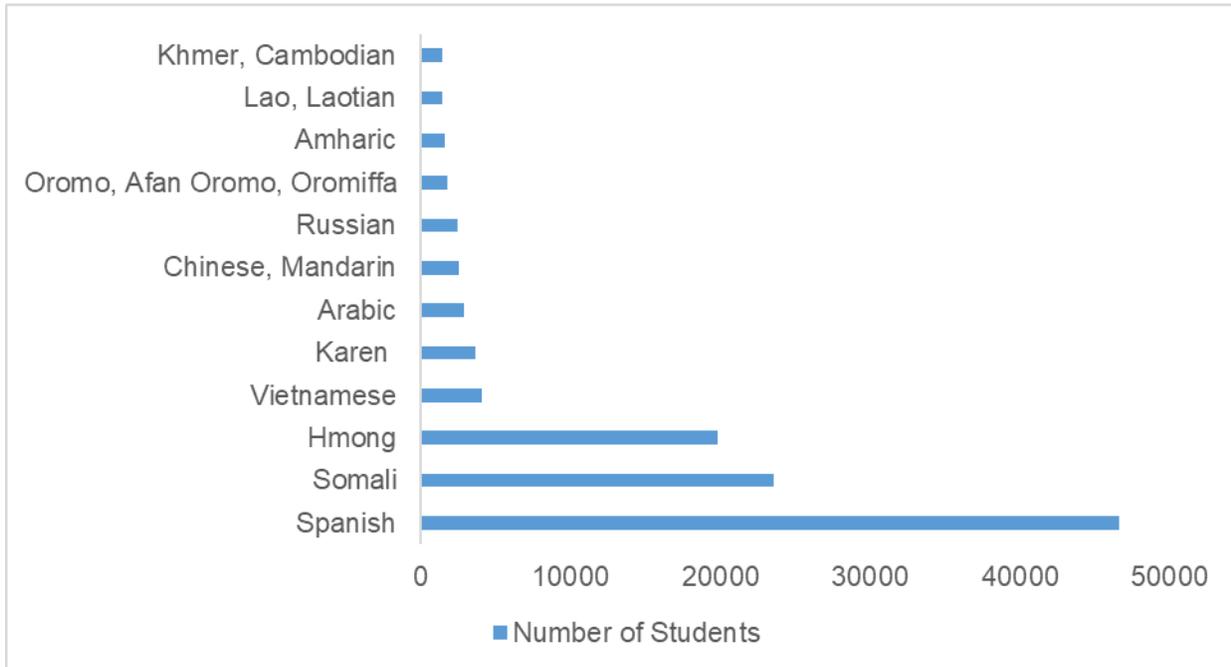
**Figure 3-1. Distribution of K-12 Students Identified as ELs Enrolled in Minnesota Public Schools by Grade, 2016-2017**



Source: English Learner Education in Minnesota: Fall 2017 Report, Minnesota Department of Education

ELs come from many different first language backgrounds. Figure 3-2 shows that, in 2016-17, the largest group of students who used another language at home spoke Spanish, followed by students who spoke Somali, Hmong, Vietnamese, Karen, Arabic, Chinese, Russian, Oromo, Amharic, Lao, and Khmer.<sup>vii</sup> While these were the most-spoken languages other than English, there were 252 different languages reported for K-12 in the Minnesota Automated Reporting Student System (MARSS).<sup>viii</sup>

**Figure 3-2. Minnesota's Most Common Languages Other Than English**



Source: 2016-17 Primary Home Language Totals, Minnesota Department of Education

## Factors that may Affect Academic Outcomes for ELs

### ***Cultural Background***

Culture is a “complex web of values and behaviors” that includes obvious characteristics, such as food preferences and clothing choices, as well as less easily observed traits, such as spiritual beliefs and family values.<sup>ix</sup> Cultural identity is shaped by group attitudes and history, but is also tempered by personal experiences and attributes. A student’s cultural identity may differ from that of family members or peers who share the same racial or ethnic background.

Differences between a student’s cultural background and the backgrounds of students that the school was designed to serve can play a role in some ELs’ academic difficulties.<sup>x</sup> If materials used for instruction and classroom assessment do not reflect students’ cultural values or norms, low grades and assessment scores may indicate cultural difference more than disability.<sup>xi</sup> Educators must take steps to develop cultural competency in working with the groups represented within their schools so that instruction is responsive to students’ backgrounds.<sup>xii</sup> As a beginning step, educators can explore websites that provide helpful information on general cultural trends. These websites are listed in the resources section at the end of the chapter. Other ways of learning about a student’s cultural background include having conversations with a community liaison if the school employs one from the student’s culture, holding conversations with the family via an interpreter, and making home visits.

## ***Migration Status***

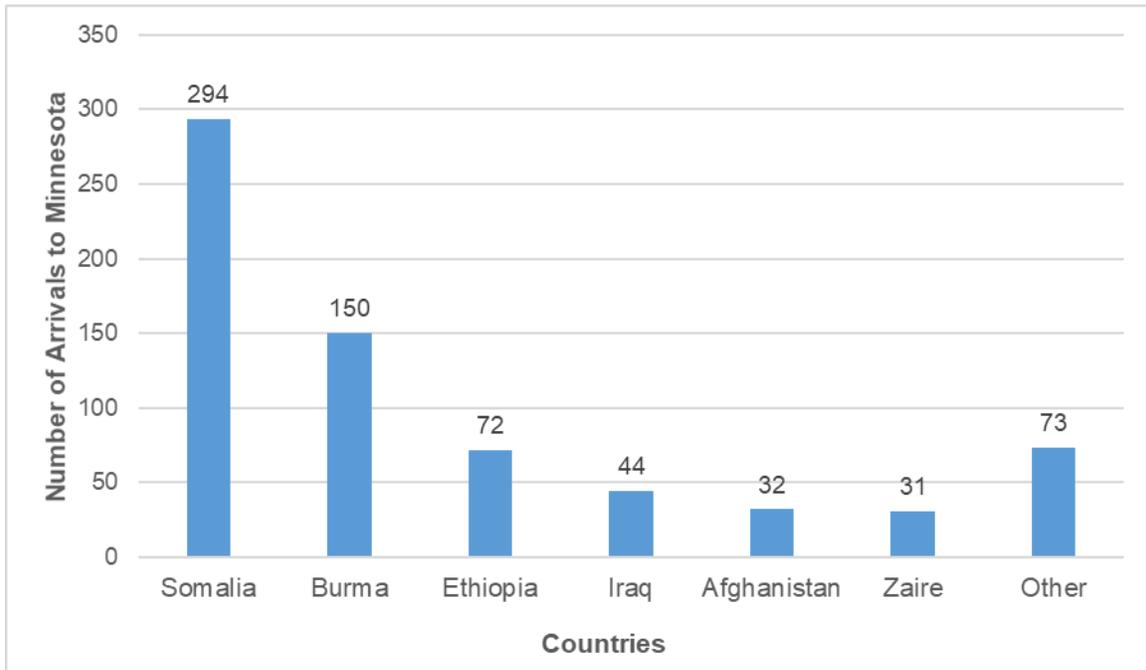
How students come to, or move within, the U.S. plays a role in the way that they adjust to the culture of a U.S. school. Each child's circumstances are different. Some students may live with their immediate families in the U.S. while others may live with extended family.

**Asylees.** Individuals who, while in the United States, request asylum because they have experienced persecution or fear they will experience persecution due to their race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political beliefs.<sup>xiii</sup> Children under the age of 21 may be included in the application for asylum.

**Refugees.** Refugees have a special status that is generally given overseas by the U.S. State Department. According to the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), a refugee is "Any person who is outside his or her country of nationality who is unable or unwilling to return to that country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution. Persecution...may be based on...race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion."<sup>xiv</sup> The U.S. Congress sets limits for the number of refugees from various regions of the world. Internal U.S. politics as well as world events affect the number of refugees allowed to enter from various regions.

Minnesota agencies and religious organizations have a strong tradition of working with refugee resettlement, although numbers of refugees arriving in the state have decreased over time. In the 1970s and 1980s, when Southeast Asian refugees were of primary concern, thousands of Hmong and Vietnamese arrived in Minnesota. In the 1990s, citizens of the former Soviet Union became eligible for refugee status based on religious persecution, resulting in Jewish and Christian refugees settling in the state. The 1990s also saw the outbreak of war in several regions of Africa, so Minnesota took in refugees from Somalia, Ethiopia, and Liberia. In the 2000s, the state began to receive refugees from Burma and Bhutan.<sup>xv</sup> Figure 3-3 shows the countries from which the most refugees came in 2017. These countries were located in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East.

**Figure 3-3. Primary Refugee Arrivals, Minnesota 2017**



Source: 2017 Refugee Arrival by County and Country of Origin, Minnesota Department of Human Services

When refugees first arrive in the U.S., they are assisted by a resettlement agency that places them in a community and connects them with a local support system. For a limited period, refugees are also eligible for some social services, which are coordinated by the Minnesota Department of Human Services. Some refugees who are originally placed in one community may later choose to move to another part of the U.S. to rejoin relatives in a process called secondary migration. Minnesota is the top destination for secondary migration in the nation.<sup>xvi</sup>

Many refugees have experienced trauma through separation from family members, loss of their home and personal possessions, living through military conflicts, and dealing with the deaths of loved ones. They may have also experienced persecution and torture because of factors such as their race, religion, nationality, ethnic background, or political beliefs.

**Immigrants.** According to the USCIS, immigrants are “admitted to the United States as a lawful permanent resident...They may be issued immigrant visas by the Department of State overseas or adjusted to permanent resident status by the Immigration and Naturalization Service in the United States.”<sup>xvii</sup> Some eligible individuals who are already in the U.S., and who are not considered immigrants, may have their status changed to that of an immigrant if they meet certain criteria. Many Liberians in Minnesota, for example, originally entered the United States with a temporary protected status due to persecution in their home country. Some of these individuals later applied for permanent resident status. Another group of immigrants are people with specialized job skills who are sponsored by an employer. People often wait many years to be given permission to immigrate to the U.S. Most immigrant families have a support network and arrive in Minnesota with more resources than refugees.

**Undocumented or Unauthorized Immigrants.** The term “undocumented”, or “unauthorized” is used to describe individuals who live in the U.S. who are not citizens and do not have legal status as immigrants, refugees, asylees, or temporary visa holders. The most common use of the term refers to individuals who live in the U.S. without the appropriate legal documentation. Around half of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. and in Minnesota are from Mexico.<sup>xviii</sup> However, people from all over the world live and work in the U.S. without legal status.<sup>xix</sup> Recent data indicate that a growing number of undocumented workers are from Asia. Chinese, Korean and Hindi are among the most common languages of these undocumented Asian workers.

While unauthorized immigrants commonly are economic migrants who come to the U.S. to work and support their families, many of them have other reasons for being in the country. Some overstay their educational visas or their temporary work visas. Others come to join family members or fiancées who are legal residents and they may be in the process of applying for permanent resident status. Still others may have been denied legal status as refugees and have applied for asylum.<sup>xx</sup> For example, in 2014, a large number of unaccompanied youth from Central America entered the U.S. in order to escape violence in their home countries.<sup>xxi</sup> At the time, some of these Central American children were able to apply to remain in the U.S., but they may have waited months or years to receive approval.

Children of parents who are unauthorized immigrants have the right to public education in the U.S. In the 1982 court case *Plyler v. Doe*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that these children have the same educational rights as citizens and legal residents. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) also requires parental permission for schools to share any information from students’ files, including information about legal status.<sup>xxii</sup> The resources section of this chapter contains links to the full text versions of *Plyler v. Doe* and FERPA.

From 2009 to 2013 there were more than 5.1 million U.S. children under the age of 18 living with at least one unauthorized immigrant parent.<sup>xxiii</sup> Most of these children are U.S. citizens because they were born in the country, but approximately 19 percent of them, most often the older children, are also unauthorized. Slightly less than half of children with unauthorized immigrant parents live in homes where no one over the age of 14 speaks English very well.<sup>xxiv</sup> From 2009 to 2013, approximately 44,000 children in Minnesota were the children of unauthorized immigrant parents.<sup>xxv</sup>

**Migrants.** Minnesota also has a population of students who qualify for Migrant Education Program (MEP) services. The size of this student group changes across years. A migrant child is identified as “a child or youth who made a qualifying move in the preceding 36 months (a) as a migratory agricultural worker or a migratory fisher; or (b) with, or to join a parent or spouse who is a migratory agricultural worker or a migratory fisher.”<sup>xxvi</sup> Migrant families who come to Minnesota are largely based in Texas. They are involved with seasonal agricultural work in this state from early spring to November, with most of the work occurring during summer. Migrant children who attend Minnesota schools for summer programs or during the school year are eligible for special migrant education programs aimed at reducing the impact of mobility, frequent absences from school, late enrollment, social isolation, and other challenges due to their migrant status.<sup>xxvii</sup> Migrant students, some of whom have disabilities, may attend summer migrant programs. Programs may be reimbursed for special education costs through the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE). Some migrant students in Minnesota (just under 20 percent) are also identified as ELs and are eligible to receive EL services.<sup>xxviii</sup>

**Other Newcomers.** There are other types of migration statuses aside from that of being an asylee, refugee, immigrant, or unauthorized immigrant. Many citizens or legal residents whose children are ELs move to Minnesota from other parts of the United States. Children in these families may have grown up largely in the U.S. and may speak some English, even though they are identified as ELs.

In addition, some international adults can temporarily enter the U.S. for a specific purpose such as training, business, or government work. These adults can be accompanied by children, who may be identified as ELs in U.S. schools.

### ***Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education***

Some ELs, especially refugees, may have had little or no formal schooling before arriving in the U.S. Older refugee students may be identified as “students with limited or interrupted formal education” or SLIFE. For an EL to be considered SLIFE in Minnesota, the student:

- Usually speaks a language other than English, or comes from a home where the language usually spoken is other than English;
- Enters school in the United States after grade 6;
- Has at least two fewer years of schooling than his or her peers;
- Functions at least two years below expected grade level in reading and mathematics; and
- May be preliterate in his or her native language.<sup>xxx</sup>

Districts and charter schools must identify SLIFE each year through the Student Support Data Collection (SSDC) system on the Minnesota Department of Education website. The Commissioner of Education is required to report the academic and English language growth of these students.<sup>xxx</sup>

The resources section contains links to tools and resources that can be used to identify ELs who are SLIFE.

### ***Acculturation***

Acculturation is the process of change that happens when the culture of newcomers to a country (e.g., immigrants, refugees, etc.) comes into contact with the mainstream culture. This contact results in changes to both of the cultures involved, but there is a much greater effect on the minority group.<sup>xxxii</sup> ELs and their families in the United States are members of these minority groups. They arrive in U.S. schools with their own beliefs, customs and language. Many ELs are adapting to a new culture on a broad, societal level, as well as to the culture of a new school. The stress associated with this process is often referred to as “acculturative stress.”<sup>xxxii</sup> The symptoms associated with acculturative stress in K-12 students may be mistaken for a possible disability. For this reason, it is important for educators to understand issues related to acculturation.

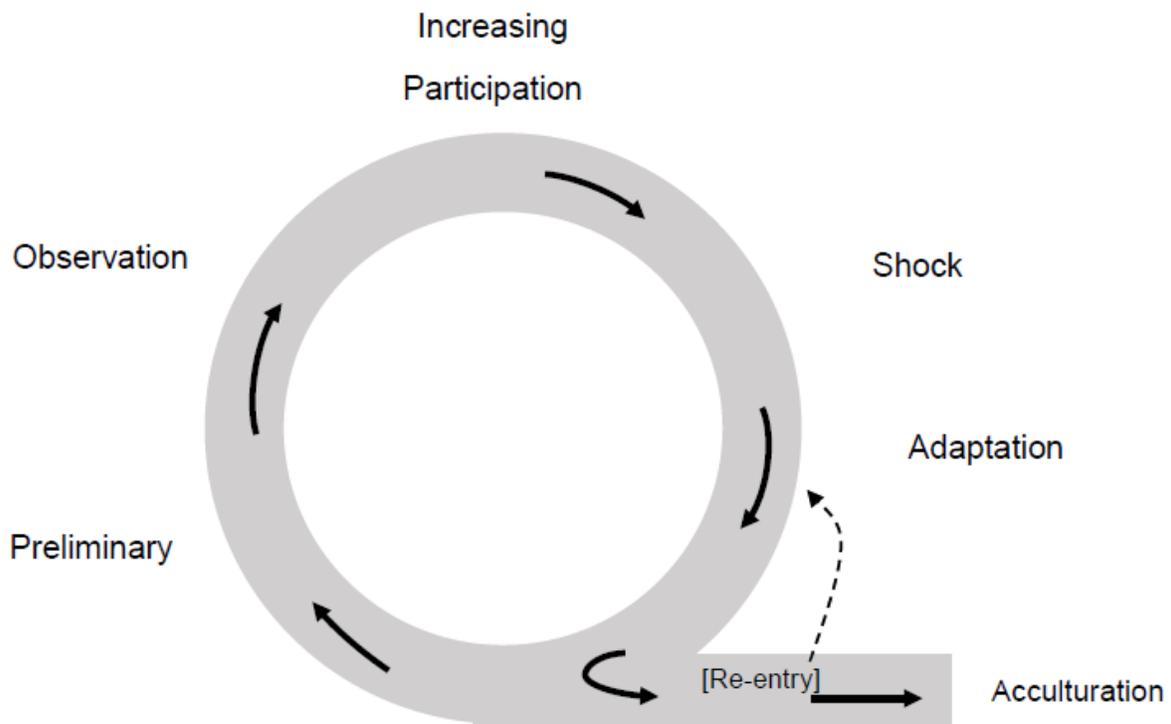
There are two ways to think about the outcome of acculturation:

- *Assimilation* means elimination of one’s cultural identity, including use of the first language, as elements of the second culture and language replace them.<sup>xxxiii</sup>
- *Biculturalism* means incorporating, in some way, behaviors – including language use, beliefs and identities that relate to each of an individual’s two cultures.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Many Minnesotans are the descendants of immigrants who *assimilated*, often because of outside pressure. These Minnesotans often study the language of their grandparents, attend ethnic festivals, and visit the “old country.” They talk wistfully of having lost something in the process of assimilation. Some newcomers to Minnesota also try to assimilate by abandoning their traditional culture. Some of the most successful new immigrants, on the other hand, are happy to be *bicultural*: they can fit into their traditional culture as well as that of mainstream Minnesota. They have gained new knowledge and skills without losing the old.

No matter which path newcomers follow, the steps in acculturation can be long and difficult. The experience of acculturation is different for each person, but there are some characteristic stages and features that most newcomers tend to experience to some degree.<sup>xxxv</sup>

**Figure 3-4. Approximate Stages of Acculturation**



*Note.* Adapted from Collier, C., Brice, A., & Oades-Sese, G. (2007). Assessment of acculturation. In G. Esquivel, E. Lopez, & S. Nahari (Eds.), *Handbook of multicultural school psychology: An interdisciplinary perspective* (pp. 353-380). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Earlbaum Associates, Publishers.

Figure 3-4 shows the general pattern of phases in the acculturation process.<sup>xxxvi</sup> An individual student may skip some phases, or go through them at different rates compared to other students, but the graphic gives an idea of the process. In the *preliminary*, or “*fascination*” phase, the individual decides to leave home and has become aware that a change of environment will take place. As he or she makes plans for the change there may be an

increasing feeling of anticipation mixed with regret. The individual may find the new culture interesting or exciting and may try out elements of the language and new ways of behaving. During the *Observation* phase, the individual arrives in the new culture and experiences widely varying emotions as he or she observes and listens to the new culture. During this phase, some individuals may experience a decrease in the amount of language they produce. Also in this phase, some people experience *disenchantment* with the new culture as they become aware of the differences between their home culture and the new culture. Misunderstandings may happen due to differences in language and customs. The person may have problems being accepted and participating in the new culture. The individual may struggle to get their basic needs met initially. Over time the challenges of functioning in the new culture grow increasingly complex. *The Increasing Participation* phase is when an individual may become more active in the new culture, whether or not he or she wants to be actively involved. Active participation in the new culture can bring feelings of frustration and be challenging initially. However, over time an individual comes to recognize and be willing to deal with at least some of the challenges of living in a new culture. The person may grow more confident, but at the same time may experience homesickness as they continue to feel like an outsider. A phase of *Culture Shock* often occurs next, when the individual realizes the degree to which she or he has left behind the native culture. A period of exhaustion, indifference, and depression may then occur. When the individual reaches the *Adaptation* phase, he or she no longer feels like an outsider in the second culture. A growing fluency in the new language allows the person to think and speak spontaneously in the new language, to get basic needs met, and to have more positive experiences engaging with others. If the individual then leaves the second culture and returns to the first culture, a *Re-entry* period may occur where there is stress associated with adjusting back to the home culture.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

In a school setting, acculturative stress can trigger behaviors that may resemble indicators of a disability, but which are most likely temporary.<sup>xxxviii</sup> These behaviors may include a period of silence, withdrawal, acting out, anxiety, and depression.<sup>xxxix</sup> Students experiencing high levels of acculturative stress may tend to have lower levels of academic achievement.<sup>xl</sup> More information on mental and emotional health in the EL student population can be found in Chapter 11.

Parents, particularly if they are refugees who have experienced war-related trauma or are victims of torture, may have some different ways of showing acculturative stress. The Center for Victims of Torture, found in the Resources section, has more information about adult trauma survivors that may be useful to school staff as they communicate with parents.

### ***Socioeconomic Status***

Studies show that socioeconomic status can have an impact on students' performance in school.<sup>xli</sup> Students' academic outcomes may be affected by factors such as lack of access to quality childcare and early childhood education, school readiness, and attendance patterns.

It can be difficult to find data that directly address the income levels of ELs' families, but data are often reported for other characteristics that are associated with EL status. For example, in Minnesota, statistics on poverty among children tend to be gathered by race and not by language proficiency. In 2016, 38 percent of Black or African American children, 18 percent of Asian and Pacific Islander children, and 22 percent of Hispanic or Latino children in Minnesota lived below the poverty line.<sup>xlii</sup> Each of these groups includes some children who are ELs.

Data on socioeconomic status may also be reported by migration status. Roughly 75 percent of U.S. children living with unauthorized immigrant parents qualify for Free and Reduced Price Lunch programs and Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) programs. Slightly more than half of children of legal immigrants qualify for the same programs.<sup>xliii</sup>

Poverty rates tend to vary by refugee group according to how recently they have arrived in the U.S. Nationwide, children whose families arrived recently were generally more likely to be from low-income homes than were children from refugee groups who have been in the country longer.<sup>xliiv</sup> Recently arrived refugee families receive a limited amount of temporary support from refugee resettlement or government agencies. Most secondary migrants in Minnesota no longer receive assistance. While they may be helped by family members or by community organizations, some secondary migrants find themselves in vulnerable or difficult circumstances. For example, Haitian, Cuban, and Laotian refugees who have lived in Minnesota for many years still experience relatively high rates of poverty.<sup>xliv</sup>

## Resources

### Websites

- [Center for Victims of Torture](https://www.cvt.org/): <https://www.cvt.org/>  
The Center for Victims of Torture website has a variety of resources that address the experiences of refugee and immigrant parents and family members who have experienced war-related trauma and torture. Some of the resources describe stages of acculturation for adults and may be relevant to school staff interacting with parents of ELs.
- [CIA World Factbook](https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/): <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>  
This resource provides information on the history, people, government, economy, geography, communications, transportation, and military of 267 world entities, including all 196 countries.
- [Culturegrams](https://www.proquest.com/products-services/culturegrams.html): <https://www.proquest.com/products-services/culturegrams.html>  
For a subscription fee, users can access information on the history, customs and lifestyles of people in more than 200 countries, all 50 U.S. states, and all 13 Canadian provinces and territories.
- [Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act \(FERPA\)](https://www.ecfr.gov/cgi-bin/text-idx?tpl=/ecfrbrowse/Title34/34cfr99_main_02.tpl): [https://www.ecfr.gov/cgi-bin/text-idx?tpl=/ecfrbrowse/Title34/34cfr99\\_main\\_02.tpl](https://www.ecfr.gov/cgi-bin/text-idx?tpl=/ecfrbrowse/Title34/34cfr99_main_02.tpl)
- [Plyler v. Doe](https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/457/202/case.html) (1982): <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/457/202/case.html>
- [United Nations Commissioner for Refugees \(UNHCR\)](http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/): <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/>  
This webpage has information and reports on displaced groups in various countries as well as the response of the UNHCR and its partners.

### Books and Articles

- DeCapua, A., Smathers, W., & Tang, F. (2009). *Meeting the needs of students with limited or interrupted schooling: A guide for educators*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press/ELT.

This handbook for secondary teachers and administrators addresses the needs and challenges of SLIFE students, particularly in the areas of literacy development and content area knowledge.

- Hoover, J. J. (2012). Reducing unnecessary referrals. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 44(4), 38-47.

This article contains a rating guide for considering cultural and linguistic influences in referral decision making.

### **MDE Resources**

- [English Learner Education](http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/dse/el/): <http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/dse/el/>  
This webpage contains information about standardized EL procedures in Minnesota schools. It addresses EL service entry and exit procedures and criteria, a comprehensive report on ELs in Minnesota, program resources, and information on the state English proficiency assessment.
- [SLIFE](http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/dse/el/slif/): <http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/dse/el/slif/>  
This webpage contains links to the following resources: SLIFE Identification Checklist, Sample Student Interview Questions, Sample Parent Interview Questions, SLIFE Identification Guidance, and the Student Support Data Collection SLIFE User Guide.
- [Minnesota Language Survey](http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/dse/el/): <http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/dse/el/>  
This webpage contains a copy of the Minnesota Language Survey (MNLS) to be completed by parents or guardians of new students. The MNLS is the first step in determining a student's eligibility for EL programs and services.

### **WIDA Resources**

- [SLIFE: Students with limited or interrupted formal education](https://www.wida.us/professionaldev/educatorresources/focus.aspx) (2015, May):  
<https://www.wida.us/professionaldev/educatorresources/focus.aspx>  
This bulletin describes the needs of students who have limited or interrupted formal education. It explores the academic and socio-emotional factors affecting students, addresses the benefits of building community partnerships, and describes how to plan instruction.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>i</sup> Minnesota Department of Education. (2017). [Minnesota standardized English learner procedures: Minnesota Language Survey](https://education.mn.gov/MDE/dse/MDE072042). Retrieved from <https://education.mn.gov/MDE/dse/MDE072042>
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- <sup>xi</sup> Hoover, J. (2012). Reducing unnecessary referrals: Guidelines for teachers of diverse learners. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 44(4), 38-47.
- <sup>xii</sup> Hudspath-Niemi, H., & Conroy, M. (2013). *Implementing Response-to-Intervention to address the needs of English-language learners: Instructional strategies and assessment tools for school psychologists*. New York: Routledge.
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- <sup>xiv</sup> U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services [USCIS]. (n.d.). [The triennial comprehensive report on immigration](https://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/USCIS/Resources/Reports%20and%20Studies/tri3fullreport.pdf). Retrieved from <https://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/USCIS/Resources/Reports%20and%20Studies/tri3fullreport.pdf>
- <sup>xv</sup> For more information see Minnesota Department of Human Services. (2016). *Refugees arrived in Minnesota from overseas by country of origin: 2003-2015*.
- <sup>xvi</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2015). [ORR indicators for refugee resettlement stakeholders](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/resource/key-indicators-for-refugee-placement-fy2016-report-released). Retrieved from <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/resource/key-indicators-for-refugee-placement-fy2016-report-released>

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